

From the American Annals of Education.
YOUTH WITHOUT CHILDHOOD.
CASPAR HAUSER.

An account of an individual kept in a dungeon, separated from all communication with the world, from early childhood to the age of seventeen. Drawn up from legal documents, by Anton von Feuerbach, President of one of the Bavarian Courts of Appeal, &c. Translated from the German. Second edition. Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1835. 18mo. pp. 182.

In passing through Germany, in the year 1829, we heard of an extraordinary being who had just "come into the world," as he subsequently expressed it, at the age of seventeen—a youth in form, and yet as ignorant of language, and of the use of his limbs, and even of the most common external objects, as the infant of a few months. He was observed on the evening of the 26th of May, 1828, near one of the gates of Nuremberg, in the posture of one intoxicated, who was equally unable to stand or to move. A letter which he held out, addressed to the Captain of a squadron of cavalry, gave no information except that he was born in 1812, and had never been suffered to leave the house, and that all inquiries concerning his origin and residence would be in vain. In reply to all the questions addressed to him by individuals and the police, he uttered a few unmeaning words and pointed with marks of exhaustion, to his blistered feet. Meat, which was offered to restore him, he rejected with visible horror; but eagerly swallowed some bread and water; and on being conducted to the stable, stretched himself upon the straw and fell into a sleep so profound, that he could scarcely be awakened. His feet were as soft as the palms of his hands; his gait was that of a child just beginning to step; and it was only with intense suffering that he could walk. His senses seemed to be locked up in torpor; and a wooden horse, brought to him by a soldier, in consequence of his frequent repetition of the German word for horse, "ross! ross!" was the first and only object which seemed to excite interest. He seated himself by it, "with a countenance smiling sweetly through his teeth," and passed hours and days, in moving and feeding, and ornamenting it, as if it were the only being which called forth his social feelings.

It will be easily believed that such an appearance would excite intense curiosity. It was a case which set at defiance all the formal interrogations and arrangements of a German government, and it was difficult to decide whether he belonged to the asylum for idiots, or the almshouse, or to the police office and the prison. After vain efforts to elicit something from him as to his residence or connections, to which he replied only in the same piteous moans and unintelligible phrases, he was committed to a tower over one of the gates under the care of a humane jailor, and appears to have enjoyed all the comforts of which his case admitted. Common sense soon relaxed the severity of the law, and he was received into the family of the jailor, as a deserted, helpless child, and under the instruction of his children, began to learn to talk.

He was visited by crowds, who taxed their ingenuity in examining the poor youth, and wearied him almost to torture, by their inquisitorial efforts to discover something. But they could only ascertain that he was an infant of adult age; in the expressive language of a London Reviewer, an example of "youth without childhood." He attempted, like an infant, to seize every glittering object which he saw; he tried to grasp the beautiful flame, in the midst of this seeming infancy, however, his guardians were astonished, on putting a pencil into his hand, to find that he could form letters distinctly. He filled a sheet with elementary characters and syllables, and closed by covering a page with the name—Caspar Hauser.

This discovery of his name, usually so important in the records of a police office, furnished no clue to the mystery which enveloped this singular being. Destitute of the conception, as well as the names of the most common objects, and averse to all the common customs and conveniences and necessities of life, there seemed no alternative, in the language of his biographer, but to regard him as the inhabitant of some distant planet, or as one buried from his birth, and now just emerged into the world. Imagination was tortured to devise some mode of accounting for his character and appearance. Some dreamed of an experiment made by modern theorists, to ascertain the state of a mind, left to advance to maturity, in utter ignorance of the world, and thus realizing the fancy picture of a German story. Others supposed him the heir of some estate or diadem, of which he was unlawfully deprived. Others still conjectured, that this difficult and dangerous plan of burying alive, had been adopted to conceal the crimes attending his birth.

Such were the conjectures floating on the public mind in reference to this singular being, when we left Germany, unable to vary our route so far as to visit Nuremberg. It was not until subsequent education had enabled Caspar to clothe his own ideas in words, that any light was thrown upon his early history; and the following account, derived from the work whose title is at the head of his article, comprises all his recollections of childhood and youth.

He neither knows who he is, nor where his home is. It was only at Nuremberg that he came into the world. Here he first learnt that, besides himself and the man with whom he had always been, there existed other men and other creatures. As long as he can recollect, he has always lived in a hole, (a small low apartment which he sometimes calls a cage) where he had always sat upon the ground, with bare feet, and clothed only with a shirt and a pair of breeches. In this apartment he never heard a sound, whether produced by a man, an animal, or by any thing else. He never saw the heavens, nor did there ever appear a brightening (daylight) such as at Nuremberg. He never perceived any difference between day and night, and much less did he ever get a sight at the beautiful light in the heavens. Whenever he awoke from sleep, he found a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water by him. Sometimes this water had a bad taste; whenever this was the case, he could no longer keep his eyes open, but was compelled to fall asleep; and

when he afterwards awoke, he found that he had a clean shirt on, and that his nails had been cut. He never saw the face of the man who brought him his victuals and drink. In his hole he had two wooden horses, and several ribbons. With these horses he had always amused himself as long as he was awake; and his only occupation was to make them run by his side, and to fix or tie the ribbons about them in different positions. Thus, one day had passed as the other; but he never felt the want of any thing, had never been sick, and once only excepted—had never felt the sensation of pain. Upon the whole he had been much happier there than in the world, where he was obliged to suffer so much. How long he had continued to live in this situation he knew not; for he had no knowledge of time. He knew not when, or how he came there. Nor had he any recollection of ever having been in a different situation, or in any other than that place. The man with whom he had always been never did him any harm. Yet one day, shortly before he was taken away—when he had been running his horse too hard, and had made too much noise, the man came and struck him upon the arm with a stick or a piece of wood; this caused the wound which he brought with him to Nuremberg.

Pretty nearly about the same time, the man, once came into his prison, placed a small table over his feet, and spread something white upon it, which he now knows to have been paper; he then came behind him, so as not to be seen by him, took hold of his hand, and moved it backwards and forwards on the paper, with a thing, (a lead pencil) which he had stuck between his fingers. He (Hauser) was then ignorant of what it was; but he was mightily pleased when he saw the black figures which began to appear upon the white paper. When he felt that his hand was free, and the man was gone from him, he was so much pleased with this new discovery, that he could never grow tired of drawing these figures repeatedly upon the paper. This occupation almost made him neglect his horses, although he did not know what those characters signified. The man repeated his visits in the same manner several times.

Another time, the man came again, lifted him from the place where he lay, placed him on his feet, and endeavored to teach him to stand.

At his final appearance the man took him over his shoulders, carried him, as he expressed it, up a hill, and brought him to Nuremberg. His recollections of his journey are very indistinct, and the fact that he sinks into a death-like sleep when he rides in a wagon, leaves it entirely uncertain in what way he was conveyed. After many ineffectual examinations, often leading to error, nothing remained but to provide the best means for alleviating his misfortunes, and supplying, in some degree, the loss of his years in childhood and youth, with the faint hope, that time might enable him to furnish a clue to his origin.

The state of nervous excitement and disease, produced by the multitude of new objects and ideas that crowded upon him, emerging thus suddenly from darkness and solitude, led the police to exclude all visitors, and place Caspar in the family of Professor Danner of the Nuremberg gymnasium, to receive such an education as he needed.

In the course of a year he was so far advanced in the knowledge of language as to commence a memoir of himself. An attempt by some unknown person to take his life, excited, perhaps, by the apprehension of discovery, appears to have been the only interruption to the course of training by which we are told he came to be "reckoned among citizens, many of the artificial wants and passions which added neither to his happiness or worth. The narrative before us presents a variety of interesting details and anecdotes, concerning the childish simplicity and amiable character of this youth, his singular views of life, and his peculiar propensities and habits, which well deserves perusal. Our limits only allow us to glance at a few of the most prominent points of the description, and the principles which they illustrate.

The darkness and seclusion in which Caspar had been kept, produced extreme sensibility to every external impression. After he recovered from that torpor caused by his entering the world, his senses were acute to a degree which was painful. Every object conveyed odors to him, which were, in a great measure, imperceptible to others, and some would produce shivering, and nausea, and fever. The touch of animals, or of metals, thrilled through his frame, and often produced unequivocal symptoms of pain and disease. His hearing and sight were also uncommonly acute; and several remarkable instances are given, in which he proved that he could discover objects and colors, as readily by night as by day. He observed with attention and accuracy; and his recollection of persons and names, at an early period, was surprising. Colors were pleasing to him in proportion to their brilliancy; and he thought an apple tree would have been more beautiful if its leaves had been red, as well as its fruit!

The great principle was established in his case, as with infants, that forms and distances are not distinguished until the touch has corrected the errors of vision. He stated after he had acquired the use of language, that in the beginning, the men and horses represented in sheets of pictures, appeared to him precisely like the men and horses that were carved in wood! He did not perceive the difference, until he had learned it by handling them. Another striking illustration of this principle is described. In this case he called a beautiful summer landscape which was seen from his room,—"ugly! ugly!" because, as he afterwards said, it appeared to him like a collection of spots of various colors on the window. Two or three years of instruction corrected these errors, and reduced his sensibility, on many points, to the common level; but he continued able to see distinctly at night.

His extraordinary memory declined with the sensibility of the senses; at the same time that his frame enlarged; and both were singularly coincident with a change in his diet. Caspar observed, in regard to his hearing, that "its acuteness had been considerably diminished since he had begun to eat meat." After he had learned regularly to eat meat, his mental activity was diminished, his eyes lost their brilliancy and expression, and his vivid propensity to constant activity was diminished.

The intense application of his mind gave way to absence, and indifference; and the quickness of his apprehension was also considerably diminished. It is questioned by the author, whether it was the result of his food, or of the previous excitement. He now exhibits nothing of genius or remarkable talent, no fancy or wit, but sound common sense, and persevering application.

His disposition was uncommonly mild and amiable, and his habits of obedience, produced as he said by early commands and punishment, were remarkable. He was equally remarkable for never yielding his preconceived notions to the authority, or even the testimony of others. He would not even believe the account given of snow, and of the growth of plants and animals, until he saw and felt it.

The same disposition to scepticism appeared in his reluctance to believe in the existence of his own, or any other spirit. Indeed, he did not seem for a long time aware of the difference between animate and inanimate objects, supposing all motion to be voluntary, and believing all matter capable of it. His case furnishes some evidence on the long disputed question, whether man would naturally arrive at the idea of a Deity. Our intercourse with the deaf and dumb, and our inquiries of instructors at home and abroad, had long since shown us that the most talented and mature minds do not attain this idea unassisted. In the case of Caspar Hauser, his biographer observes, "that he brought with him from his dungeon not the least pre-sentiment of the existence of God, not a shadow of faith in any more elevated, invisible existence." It was not until his faithful instructor led him to remark on the things which he heard and saw within himself, that he could believe in any objects but those of the external senses. Two of the most intelligent deaf mutes we have ever known, were for months utterly incredulous of all that was said to them of an invisible being. But the example of Caspar Hauser, like that of the deaf mutes, also proves, that the idea of a Supreme cause commends itself to the reason and feelings of man, when his mind is cultivated. A touching incident which occurred in the course of his early education will illustrate this point, and must close our extracts from this interesting volume.

His instructor showed him for the first time the starry heavens. His astonishment and transport surpassed all description. He could not be satisfied with the sight, and was ever returning to gaze upon it. "That," he exclaimed, "is, indeed, the most beautiful sight that I have ever yet seen in the world. But who has placed all these numerous beautiful candles there? Who lights them? Who puts them out?" When he was told that, like the Sun, with which he was already acquainted, they always continue to give light, he asked again, "Who placed them there above, that they may always continue to give light?" At length standing motionless, with his head bowed down, and his eyes staring, he fell into a train of deep and serious meditation. When he again recovered his recollection, his transport had been succeeded by deep sadness. He sunk trembling upon a chair, and asked, with a burst of tears, "why that wicked man had kept him always locked up, and had never shown him any of these beautiful things?"

The whole story is a striking exhibition of the value of childhood, as a part of life—the necessity of simultaneous progress in body and in mind, in order to produce the man. It is an affecting illustration of that most criminal neglect, which leaves a human being to become in understanding and stature of a man, but in knowledge a child, which allows him to acquire a power, most valuable or most dangerous, without giving him the knowledge necessary to use it right, or inspiring the disposition to employ it for good purposes, if the view of the starry heavens could rouse this gentle youth to such reprehensions of the man to whom on other occasions he expressed affection. "Oh! what will be the language of those benighted beings whom the neglect or oppression of civilized and christian men, has shut up in intellectual darkness, when they see the glories of that world which lies beyond the firmament!"

Probably water mixed with opium.

In recent newspapers, we find the following paragraph:

Caspar Hauser.—The mystery which hung about the origin and early life of this extraordinary young man, is said to be in a way of explanation. It seems, according to an account which we find in an English periodical, that Caspar Hauser was the fruit of an illicit amour; that a priest, the reputed father, took charge of the child from the moment of his birth, and concealed him in a subterranean hole or vault, in a convent where he was residing; that thus imprisoned and shut out from all human intercourse, the unhappy being passed his existence until within a day or two of his being found, as related in the history of his life which has been published, when the priest being compelled to quit the convent, and having no other place of concealment at hand, released the child, and finally disclosed it in a subterranean hole or vault, in a convent where he was residing; that thus imprisoned and shut out from all human intercourse, the unhappy being passed his existence until within a day or two of his being found, as related in the history of his life which has been published, when the priest being compelled to quit the convent, and having no other place of concealment at hand, released the child, and finally disclosed it in a subterranean hole or vault, in a convent where he was residing; 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